

Walking a Fine Line:

The Canada Line, Vancouver's 2010 Olympics and the Eyes of the World

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The countdown to the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games has begun and Vancouver's construction boom is hard to miss. Projects of all descriptions are in full swing. Stretching 19 kilometres, costing \$1.9 billion and taking 4 years to build, the Canada Line is the biggest and most expensive of them all.

It's not hard to fathom how the Canada Line came to be the Lower Mainland's most expensive transportation project.¹ On Cambie Street, months of disruptive roadwork were needed just to move underground pipes out of the way before work on the tunnel could begin. To dig under False Creek, an enormous Tunnel-Boring Machine (handily called the T.B.M. for short) began excavating in June, 2006 at the wormlike rate of 10 meters a day.² In April, 2007, amid great fanfare, it broke ground at its downtown destination, before beginning work on a second tunnel.

Will the Canada Line ultimately prove itself worthy of all this expense and disruption? Either way, its success or failure will be judged on more than its effectiveness as public transit. Like the upcoming Olympics, the Canada Line is a sign of the times, a tool of enterprising local leaders who market the city to tourists and global investors.

Of course, the Canada Line has nothing to do with the upcoming Olympics. They are officially unrelated because the Canada Line was not promised in the Vancouver 2010 Bid Book.³ The Canada Line was designed for local commuters. As the Canada Line website dryly informs the public, it is not an "Olympic project."⁴

Not everyone is buying it. Outside the delicate ground of local politics, there is no reason to deny a connection. A recent article in the Washington Post presents Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan's view on the matter: "The Olympics [will be] a good

¹ Cheryl Mah, "On Track for the Future," Construction Business Magazine, Sep./Oct. 2005, 12 Aug. 2007 <http://www.constructionbusiness.ca/downloads/cb_oct05_rav.pdf>.

² Canada, Transport Canada, "Tunnel Boring Begins on Canada Line in Vancouver," Press Release No. H049/06, 12 Jun. 2006, 12 Aug. 2007 <<http://www.tc.gc.ca/mediaroom/releases/nat/2006/06-h049e.htm>>.

³ Blair Redlin, "High Risk: An Analysis of the Proposed Public-Private Partnership for the Richmond-airport-Vancouver Rapid Transit Project", Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – BC Office, May 2003, 12 Aug. 2007 <http://policyalternatives.ca/documents/BC_Office_Pubs/rav.pdf>.

⁴ Canada Line, "Is this an Olympic project?" Frequently Asked Question no. 4, n.d., 22 Jun. 2007 <<http://www.canadaline.ca/aboutFAQ.asp>>.

deal for Vancouver. The city's rail line will be extended to the airport."⁵ Even Canada Line Rapid Transit Inc. (CLCO) allows that "Olympic dates are important because if we are going to build the line now, it must be complete by 2009 in order to avoid major construction during the Games."⁶

The decision to fund the Canada Line was also timed to Olympic deadlines. During the Olympic bid process, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) explicitly doubted the capacity of Vancouver's existing transportation facilities to cope with projected numbers of tourists. The Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation therefore lobbied governments to fund the Canada Line. A 2004 freedom-of-information request by the Cambie Boulevard Heritage Society uncovered a letter from Jack Poole, then chair of the Olympic bid corporation, to BC premier Gordon Campbell. The letter explained that funding for a Richmond/Airport/Vancouver link would be a "valuable tool in the [Olympic] campaign."⁷

Publicly, Jack Poole and his colleagues maintained convinced that the Canada Line and the Olympics were unrelated. After issuing a press release pledging not to bid on business opportunities related to the upcoming Olympic Games, Concert Properties, a real estate development company, entered a (failed) bid for the Canada Line's private construction contract. Jack Poole was chairman of the board.

The Canada Line and the Olympics are connected by the interests of the powerful. In the late 1970's, University of California geography professor Harvey Molotch concluded that the interests of local elites are naturally aligned. "However split they might be on other issues,"⁸ Molotch argued that the basic desire of local leaders as well as the unofficial primary job of governments is to court growth. He coined the term "growth machine" to describe the imperative for continual economic growth that makes

⁵ Doug Struck, "Vancouver's Olympic Challenge: City Faces Pressure to Fulfill Social Pledges That Helped It Win 2010 Winter Games," Washington Post, 23 Jul. 2007, 12 Aug. 2007 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/22/AR2007072201256_pf.html>.

⁶ Canada Line, "Is this an Olympic project?"

⁷ C. Smith, "Games Head Suggested RAV Would Help Bid," Georgia Straight, 7 Jan 2004, 22 June 2007 <<http://www.straight.com/article/games-head-suggested-rav-would-help-bid>>.

⁸ Harvey Molotch. "The City as a Growth Machine," American Journal of Sociology, 1976, 12 Aug. 2007 <<http://hw-ar.com/face/molotch.html>>.

localities tick as economic and political entities. Another geographer, David Harvey, offered the term "governance" to describe politically active decision-makers. Not just the government, the elite circle of governance includes business leaders, influential labour unions, political parties and chambers of commerce.

To the delight of local governance, Vancouver continues to experience rapid growth. Population growth of 2.6% annually helps to keep the economy booming, particularly in sectors related to construction and development.⁹ The upcoming 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games sweeten the pot even more for development profits. As Jack Poole explained to a conference of real-estate developers back in 2002, "if the Olympic bid wasn't happening, we would have to invent something."¹⁰

"Inventing something" to attract investment is what urban governance does best. The Canada Line is a great example.

By speeding travel between the international airport and downtown, the RAV connection will place Vancouver's central business district within more convenient reach of world centres like Hong Kong and London. Initial lobbies for funding the Canada Line centred around this global strategic significance. The Vancouver Airport Authority's lobby presented a seductive vision of the rapid rail connection situating British Columbia "at the crossroads of international travel, trade and tourism."¹¹ Offering similar rhetoric, Canada Line Rapid Transit Inc., pledges to enhance Vancouver's "economic health as Canada's western gateway."¹²

These kinds of promises might seem familiar. They have been made before. Bill Bennett's 1980 announcement of Expo '86 envisioned Vancouver's position as "Canada's

⁹ Christopher Leo and Kathryn Anderson, "Being Realistic about Urban Growth," Canadian Cities in Transition: Local Through Global Perspectives, ed. Trudi Bunting and Pierre Filion (Don Mills, ON: Oxford UP, 2006) 396.

¹⁰ Donald Gutstein, "Developers are the Games' real winners," The Georgia Straight, 7 Jun. 2007, 77.

¹¹ "YVR board urges province to take over RAV project," Meetings & Incentive Travel Magazine, Aug 2004, 12 Aug 2007 <http://www.meetingscanada.com/newsletters/August_2004.html>.

¹² Canada Line, "About the Canada Line," n.d., 12 Aug 2007 <<http://www.canadaline.ca/about.asp>>

gateway to the Pacific" and "the front line of Canada's opportunities for trade and contact 's with [...] the Pacific Rim."¹³

Since then, local governance has only become more creative in its courtship of private capital and development. This trend toward entrepreneurial governance relies heavily on image and marketing. Governments, business improvement areas, public-private partnerships and tourism boards spend more on logos, slogans, gentrified tourist districts and new convention centres than ever before.¹⁴

When businesses along the path of Canada Line construction experienced an economic downturn due to several months of limited access, government aid took the form of a small marketing grant. The "Open for Business" and "I Shop the Line" campaigns were launched in 2006 by Canada Line's Vancouver Business Liaison Communications Committee (BLCC) to promote consumption along those streets hardest hit by construction.¹⁵

The Cambie Village Business Improvement Association (BIA), formed in April 2006 to "promote a positive local image,"¹⁶ has marketed the Cambie Village area aggressively, keeping a upbeat profile despite losing support from some local businesses that are suffering economically. Rogue business leaders in the Cambie Village area have publicized their hardship in defiance of the rosy marketing image prescribed by local governance, lobbying instead for direct government compensation.¹⁷

At the global scale, the Canada Line and other projects such the Olympic Village development are designed to help market an image of Vancouver as liveable, environmentally sustainable and prosperous. According to a video produced by the City of Vancouver in 2006:

¹³ Bill Bennett, as quoted in K. Olds, Globalization and Urban Change: Capital, Culture, and Pacific Rim Mega-Projects (Oxford: Oxford, 2001) 101.

¹⁴ K. McCallum, A. Spencer and E. Wylie, "The City as an Image-creation Machine: A Critical Analysis of Vancouver's Olympic Bid," Association of Pacific Coast Geographers Yearbook, (Vol 76, 2005) 31.

¹⁵ Canada Line Business Liaison & Communications Committees, "Businesses are Open... Are You?" News Release, 20 March 2006.

¹⁶ Cambie Village Business Association, "Cambie Village gets BIA Designation," Cambie Village News, July 2006 (1:1) 1.

¹⁷ C. Rossi, "Cambie Village says business looking up," Vancouver Courier, 6 Sep 2006, 22 June 2007 <<http://www.vancourier.com/issues06/092106/news/092106nn3.html>>.

The Olympics have given us an opportunity really to show Vancouver to the world, sort of like Expo '86 did 20 years ago. I think it's a different Vancouver that we're going to show now.... Vancouver has a lot to offer, not only to the Lower Mainland but to North America and to the world in terms of the way we built this city: the liveability of the city, the movement towards doing things in a much more sustainable manner.¹⁸

The Olympics will provide a key opportunity for Vancouver's local leaders to broadcast these images worldwide.

The Canada Line is supposed to replace 10 lanes worth of traffic and eliminate 14,000 tons of greenhouse gas emissions by 2020.¹⁹ Reducing car dependency and shrinking the city's footprint on the natural environment is a wonderful argument for any investment in public transit. However, the high profile of the Canada Line as a connection between the airport and the central city gives it particular value as an image enhancer. This value helps to explain why it received funding ahead of other public transit projects such as a rapid transit corridor in Central Coquitlam, previously ranked a top priority.²⁰

Vancouver's 2003 Olympic Bid demonstrated the marketing value of images of sustainability and a healthy natural environment. In 2003, UBC students Katherine McCallum and Amy Spencer gained access to communication materials produced by Vancouver's official Bid Corporation, and found that the Bid made extensive use of "a unique marketing platform centred on nature."²¹ "Our Home," a video produced exclusively for the eyes of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), showed abundant scenes of wilderness and parks underscored by the sounds of wind, waves and gulls.

All this fuss for marketing Vancouver to a global audience as a liveable and sustainable city has its ironies. Notably, the eco-friendly image is crafted to encourage tourists and international elites to arrive via unsustainable air travel and to participate in mass

¹⁸ Ian Smith, Manager of Development for S.E. False Creek, quoted in: GV Productions, "Olympic Village," video, prod. City of Vancouver et al., 8 Mar. 2006, 12 Aug 2007 <http://vancouver.ca/Greaterdot_wa/index.cfm?fuseaction=GVTV.storyDet&storyid=531>.

¹⁹ Canada, Transport Canada, "Canada Line Reaches Landmark Breakthrough," Press Release No. H059/07, 7 Apr. 2007, 12 Aug. 2007 <<http://www.tc.gc.ca/mediaroom/releases/nat/2007/07-h059e.htm>>.

²⁰ Blair Redlin, "High Risk."

²¹ K. McCallum, A. Spencer and E. Wyly, "The City as an Image-creation Machine," 35.

consumption once they land. Set to begin operating just in time for the Olympics, the Canada Line serves uneasily coexisting imperatives of growth and sustainability. Whether this new rapid transit infrastructure will take the equivalent of 10 lanes' worth of cars off Vancouver's roads will depend on how well it is actually used. Its success as a marketing tool for Vancouver during the Olympics will depend on how convincingly local governance actually delivers its many promises of environmental and social sustainability.

The eyes of the world can be surprisingly critical. When the city of Atlanta bussed homeless people out of town during the 1996 Olympics, bad publicity worldwide negated the desired local image of prosperity and order.²²

The promise of the Canada Line's creation helped Vancouver-based governance to secure the enormous opportunity and liability of hosting the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Once the line is functioning, it will help to receive the tourists and the global elites whose arrival has been so eagerly anticipated. Showcasing model sustainability in a newly built Athlete's Village or Canada Line may help to project positive images of Vancouver, but when the world's gaze alights on the city for a scant two weeks in February of 2010, it will not be easily fooled.

The world in which urban governance operates has evolved since the term "growth machine" emerged in the 1970's. Capital has become highly mobile, free to flit across national borders and land on the brightest flower it can find. When the lights, cameras and eyes of the world are focused on Vancouver, they will find a carefully composed picture of sustainability, prosperity and social justice. Let's hope the image will have enough functional depth to withstand the world's scrutiny.

²² Doug Struck, "Vancouver's Olympic Challenge."

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